

Prickly Pear

Opuntia ficus-indica



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| Common names | Cow's tongue cactus, cow tongue prickly pear, desert prickly pear, beavertail, Santa Rita, Indian fig, bunny ears, nopal, abrojo, joconostle, vela de coyote. |
| Origin | Prickly pear cacti that belong to Cactaceae family (the family of cactus) are found in all of the deserts of the American Southwest. |
| Description | Common name given to a large group of succulent cacti spread throughout the world with edible fruits or tunas. |
| Growth Habitat | Found throughout the world. |
| Foliage | The leaves are called pads, paddles or nopales. The oval or round pads have an outer green skin with spines as well as glochids (fine bristles) that can easily and painfully lodge into skin with inner green flesh that can be cooked and eaten. |
| Flowers | The flowers range from yellow, orange, red to purple. Multiple brilliantly shiny petals sometimes with different coloured centers, only lasting a day. |

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| Fruits | The prickly pear fruits or tunas with reddish-orange or purple skin and deep purple interiors are considered to be the sweetest, but the white-skinned varieties are more popular in Mexico. Spines and fine bristles are also on the fruits. |
| Soil | Most require course, well-drained soil in dry, rocky flats or slopes. But some prefer mountain juniper forests, while others require steep, rocky slopes in mountain foothills. |
| Pruning | Remove complete pads with as clean a cut as possible to avoid pathogens from entering into the cut and infecting the plant. |
| Fertilization | Fertilize the prickly pear cactus every one to two months during the spring and summer with a N:P:K 5:10:10 water-soluble fertilizer. |
| Propagation | Cut off a pad. Let the wound dry for about a week, then plant the pad in a shallow depression cut side down. Water every 2 weeks to get the roots started. |
| Harvest | The fruit is ripe enough to be harvested when the birds begin to feast on it or the fruit drops to the ground or the colour deepens. If the fruit is still green where it attaches to the pad, it is not quite ready to harvest. |
| Nutritional Properties | Prickly pears are low in saturated fat, and very low in cholesterol and sodium. They're also a good source of calcium, magnesium, iron and potassium, and a very good source of dietary fiber, Vitamin C and A and magnesium. |
| Health Benefits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The use of prickly pear as a natural helper in the treatment of diabetes is well known among native cultures. It is known to have hypoglycemic effects. The prickly pear has been reported as beneficial to a whole host of conditions. Research has shown it has beneficial actions on the cardiovascular system by |

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| | <p>decreasing platelet activity. This means it's good for both the heart and blood vessels.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nopal Cactus is the only plant to contain 24 of the known betalains, which are potent anti-inflammatory agents. Betalains are polyphenolic pigments found in beets. Betalains give nopal cactus their purple-red and yellow colors. Prickly pear juice power comes from its ability to fight chronic inflammation. • The pads of prickly pear fruit contain a wide range of amino acids. This includes the 8 essential amino acids, which our bodies don't produce. This is a plant that provides more essential amino acids than most other sources. • The mucilage found inside the sticky pads of the stem contain polysaccharides that are found in immune system stimulating plants. |
| <p>Commercial Uses</p> | <p>As a vegetable, the pads or nopales can be used in salads, casseroles, and soups, grilled and prepared in a variety of other ways. The pads are somewhat tart and have a green bean or asparagus like flavor. Prickly pear fruits are peeled before eaten fresh. The fruits are often used to make candies, jelly or drinks such as vodka or lemonade. In Mexican folk medicine, its pulp and juice have been used to treat numerous maladies, such as wounds and inflammations of the digestive and urinary tracts. The pads and stems can be used as fodder for cattle.</p> |
| <p>Food Suggestion</p> | <p>Prickly Pear Salad Dressing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 125ml prickly pear puree • 80ml salad oil (not olive oil) • 1 tsp. salt • 1 tsp. sugar • 3 to 4 tblsp tarragon white wine vinegar |

To make the puree:

Wash and peel ripe prickly pears. Cut in half with a knife and scoop out the seeds. Force the raw pulp through a medium to fine strainer.

To make the dressing:

Shake all ingredients together in a covered jar. Makes about 1 cup. This pretty pink dressing is thin like an oil and vinegar dressing, but lower in calories. Good on fruit salads and tossed green salads.